

*Byunjeungbop ui natjam* [Dialectic's Daydream], by Dongjin Seo. Seoul: Kkurie Books, 2014. 232 pp., KRW 15,000, ISBN: 978-89-94682-16-7 (hardcover)

*Gwaro saboe* [The Overworking Society], by Young-seon Kim. Seoul: Imagine, 2013. 206 pp., KRW 10,000, ISBN: 979-11-5531-001-4 (paperback)

*Ilhagi jeon en mollatdeon gottul* [What We Didn't Know Before Entering the Job Market], by Dong-min Ryu. Seoul: Ungjin Think Big, 2013. 279 pp., KRW 13,000, ISBN: 978-89-01-15634-7 (paperback)

*Nodong omnun minjujuui ui ingan jok sangch'odul* [Humanly Cost of Democracy without Labor Right], by Jangjip Choi. Seoul: Humanitas, 2013. 168 pp., KRW 10,000, ISBN: 978-89-6437-176-3 (paperback)

### **Thematic Book Reviews: Recent Books on Labor in South Korea**

The four books reviewed here are written in Korean, primarily for a South Korean audience, on the subject of precarious conditions for and the status of Korean labor. Why is it useful to introduce these books to English readers in mostly Anglophone academic environments of research or teaching? One answer to this question is that contemporary books written in Korean are still rarely translated into other languages, including English—a hegemonic language with privilege in the world of knowledge production and distribution. This prevents the exposure of Korean social contexts and discourse and constrains Korean influence on intellectual and public dialogue in the world. Consider the speed and volume that books in non-Korean languages are translated: some books in French and Japanese are translated to Korean before they are translated into English—and some are never translated into English—not to mention the sheer volume of English to Korean translations. In this context, it is puzzling why the introduction of books originally written in Korean is still limited to selected works in Korean fiction and poetry, sponsored mostly by the Korean government and only in some occasion by Western publishers.

I am aware of inter-regional collaboration among East Asian and Asian intellectuals, including feminists and local activists, to contest the Euro-American knowledge circulation, especially through inter-Asia conferences and journal publication. However, if we are thinking of making the

contemporary world a globally connected one—whether for commerce or movements seeking alternatives to the market, via communication technology, cosmopolitan media content, or opportunities for travel—inter-regional efforts might be insufficient in connecting interested people and audiences beyond the region.

I have long wondered why there is no Korean equivalent to the work of Italian public intellectuals from the autonomist school, or the work of their South American counterparts in emancipation pedagogy, which seem well circulated among the Anglophone readership. More importantly, why is the writing of public intellectuals that arose from the context of Arab Spring, Greek Crisis, and Occupy Movement promptly translated to Korean for a public audience (beyond people who have access to social media in English), whereas books written by Korean public intellectuals are not introduced to the Middle East, peripheral EU nations, or those involved in the global youth protests against financial capitalism? Their knowledge production is no less rigorously grounded than the above mentioned examples, especially since the period of the democratization movement through to the Asian financial crisis and up to the period of neoliberal labor market reform.

A positive interpretation of the lopsided flow of translations is that Korean public intellectuals are more advantaged as world citizens; they know more than other local intellectuals who have not been exposed to the Korean context or book translation market—one that produces a vast amount of translations in multiple languages. But, more importantly, as inter-Asia scholars note (Chen 2010; Baik 2013), if we want to rationalize an inter-regional effort aimed at contesting Western- and English-centered knowledge production that avoids parochialism and reaches outwardly towards the world, we might want to think of an appropriate next step. To me, introducing books written by Korean public intellectuals in non-Korean languages—in this case, English—is a practical way to reach this goal.

By saying this, I hope it is clear that I appreciate work published in Korean by Korean scholars as the work of public intellectuals and academics. In other words, their work cannot be assigned to one of two mutually exclusive categories: academic or non-academic work. This is similar to the Italian, South American, and Greek cases; scholars there became publically influential because of their historical, political, and social experience and involvement. It is in this kind of locally-grounded intellectual, including the Korean authors

reviewed here, that I see a contribution to the re-shaping of global intellectual and public dialogues. The kind of knowledge these intellectuals produce is not a result of objective distance from their objects of research and analysis, considered necessary in Western modern science; it is, rather, a result of deep self-reflection, solidarity, and praxis (*seongchal*, *yeondae*, *silchion*) to the social reality that happens to be their objects of research. Here, ethos and pathos are meshed as essential to the articulation of their positions and argumentation.

The four books reviewed here are written by Korean scholars who fall into the category of “public intellectual.” Regardless of the level of abstraction, all books are written for the public. Ryu’s book, self-admittedly, is a collection of essays, not an academic book. Challenging the assumption of what an economist can do or say, he shares his micro-observations on the culture and assumptions of work in post-Asian financial crisis Korea using film and mass media materials. Kim’s book is also a social critique and an oral history of the culture of overwork in South Korea; yet, his book relies on data from his doctoral thesis and represents a successful conversion of his dissertation into a book accessible to the public. Choi’s book is probably the most notable in that it required physically laborious efforts to meet with people on the margins of the labor market—day laborers, garment workers, migrant workers, youth union members, etc. Compared to the others, Choi’s book also employs a surprisingly different tone and style of writing—paternalistic and personal, rather than the rational language common among academics and intellectuals. Seo’s book, despite its abstract content, is a key source of inspiration for those learning about how to think through universal questions in a local context, and vice-versa—that is, how to think of local contexts engaging conceptual subjects and discussions in a way that can reshape world dialogue.

By focusing on Seo’s conceptual interrogation of labor in general and labor rights as an interlocutor, I would like to generate a dialogue among the reviewed books’ approaches to work and labor, and contemplate the prevalent metanarratives of work, labor, and welfare discourse in contemporary South Korea. Seo’s book introduces two critical points, among many. First, how and why labor rights became subsumed to citizens’ rights, despite the fact that these rights were at the root of building citizens’ rights. Labor rights originated in the outcry of starving workers struggling to survive during the early stages of the French Revolution. It was at this time that workers pressed the bourgeoisie to mediate the political crisis by ameliorating workers’ risk at work (e.g.,

accidents), but without touching upon class conflicts in a fundamental way. The solution was to expand workers' insurance to a social insurance system by privileging wage-earning workers as contributors to and beneficiaries of social benefits; this is the genesis of the social or welfare state (p. 113). Therefore, the way in which citizens' rights were established in a social insurance system is through conflating citizens' duties and rights with wage laborers who can pay taxes and into pensions, thereby earning the right of compensation. However, as Seo aptly points out, this history is not part of our collective memory; we tend to think of labor rights as one of example of citizens' rights, along with other citizen categories, such as women, LGBT, people with different abilities, etc.

Second, related to the way in which wage laborers were privileged in the liberal social insurance system (and capitalist labor market), no matter how laborers' rights were turned into a sub-category of citizens' rights, Seo argues that the way in which we think of wage labor as normal, or befitting a decent citizen's condition, reiterates the normative framework of understanding work and labor only in the context of wage work and labor. This has two implications: first, it dismisses other kinds of work necessary for producing commodities and reproducing labor, but do not belong to the wage system; second, it mystifies unemployment as an exceptional status and leads us to believe that if we get rid of unemployment we will bring security to otherwise precarious living. However, history and the theory of capitalism evince that waged livelihoods are marginal and unwaged livelihoods are normal, even prerequisite, for controlling labor market through competition. Unemployment is not to be understood as an exceptional status; this new understanding, argues Seo, will demystify wage labor and present unemployment as it is: a normal and central component of the capitalist system (p. 102).

The books by Choi, Kim, and Ryu demonstrate a deep respect of and solidarity with workers, yet I see different foci and ways of showing this respect and solidarity. Choi, for instance, focuses on marginalized workers of regular and irregular labor, asserting that trade union and parties need to pay attention to them as much as privileged wage workers (p. 77), and that South Korea needs focused welfare benefits as opposed to universal welfare benefits for these marginalized workers (p. 95). Ryu seeks to debunk typecasts associated with workers, urging us to go beyond conventional associations—e.g., manual work being simple work—by differentiating between different kinds of work—

mental, emotional, manual—as attributes of all workers, regardless of wage (high or low) or social prestige. Labor, for Ryu, is simply about selling labor time for a wage (p. 55). Furthermore, while problematizing the rigidity of work life absent pleasure or reward (p. 191), he suggests employers choose welfare for workers (providing Western examples as reference) over labor flexibility (p. 108). Kim, who shares Ryu's position on the rigidity of work life, underscores the imbalance between work and life in South Korean society, arguing that despite improvements in the welfare system, including government campaigns promoting work-life balance and mandating maternity leave, extended hours of work and the impossible condition of carrying out both childcare and wage work prevents a balance from being achieved (p. 32). Kim adds that Korean employment culture under lax government regulation does not allow for sufficient leisure time (p. 73). Ultimately, according to Kim, this breach of work-life balance prevents the democratization of Korean society, because it does not permit a kind of employment that would promote workers' health and safety (p. 183).

If I dare see things from Seo's perspective, then I'm led to conclude that despite different emphases put on various aspects of work and labor—protection of marginalized workers, expansion of the definition of what it means to be a worker, or work-life balance—the assertions made in support of a more democratic society, along with expressions of solidarity with workers, might be confounded by, or actively reproduce, the myth of wage work and employment as the norm of living in a capitalist system. The authors do not challenge the fundamental point that a capitalist system does not permit decent employment based on a healthy work-life balance. Therefore, the question here is not “How do we modify the capitalist market?” but “Can the capitalist market ever be good enough?” In relation to the idealization of the welfare system as a thing which can provide a better future for workers and citizens, Seo's understanding of the welfare state's origins reminds us that this very system was a consequence of the bourgeoisie's efforts to curb the revolution, tantalizing workers by entrusting their wage earning abilities as the basis of social insurance and assigning the act of taking on risk as the workers' responsibility.

I wonder whether the work of Korean public intellectuals is a reflection of what the Korean public wants to hear from them: the precariousness of living in contemporary South Korea and whether welfare can be a savior

from such living. This anticipation for welfare to replace precarious living seems omnipresent; either as nostalgic in some western countries or futuristic in nations where welfare state was not preceded to neoliberal regimes. The Korean public intellectuals' work on work, labor, and welfare, then, might be symptomatic to intellectuals in the world who are facing similar realities and sharing commitment to the public. Despite their engaged and self-reflexive writing, my concern is whether it challenges the predominant—albeit ahistorical—view of work, labor, and welfare. By not challenging the view, influential public intellectuals' work might dangerously share the same premise of liberal bourgeois aspirations: ameliorating class conflict so as to avoid its reshaping.

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Jesook SONG  
University of Toronto

## Index of The Review of Korean Studies

Volume 19 Number 1 (June) 2016

### Articles

Don BAKER

The Emergence of a Religious Market in Twentieth-century Korea

Seok-Won LEE

The “Korea Problem”: Moritani Katsumi and the East Asian Community in Colonial Korea, 1931-1945

LIM Chaisung

Health and Diseases of Laborers in Colonial Korea: Focusing on the Cases of the Bureau of Posts and Telecommunications, the Japanese Government General of Korea

CHOE Key-Sook

Media Cultural Politics and the Politics of Sympathy—*Queen Seondeok*: Dramatized Conspiracy Theory as “Power-Narrative”

Kwanghee SHIN

Production and Enshrinement of Arhat Paintings during the Late Joseon Dynasty

Aramchan LEE

Traumatized Masculinity in Jung Jiwoo's *Happy End*

EunSuk SA

The Changing Jobs of Journalists and the Function of Journalism in South Korea: Focus on Political Recruiting

### Materials on Korean Studies

Daniel C. KANE

Mary and Clarence Greathouse Papers (1803–1905) at the University of Kentucky (Lexington, Kentucky)

### Book Reviews

Shunichi TAKEKAWA

*The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*

HONG Jong-wook

*Tōa renmei undō to Chōsen, Chōsenjin: Nitchū sensōki ni okeru shokuminchi teikoku Nihon no danmen*

Pyong Gap MIN

*The Spirit Moves West: Korean Missionaries in America*

Kyung Hyun KIM

*K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*